

Seattle's Multifamily Code Update

Comments from the American Institute of Architects Seattle (AIA Seattle)

The American Institute of Architects Seattle represents 2,000 architects and related professionals with a commitment to making our community better through design. We appreciate the opportunity to offer this testimony regarding proposed changes to the multifamily code. Our members have real-life experience working with clients, developers and community members in our city, trying to create well-designed residential buildings within the restrictions of our current code. We applaud the committee's willingness to take on the important issue of multifamily development.

Looking at our city's multifamily code is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to re-imagine our city. What kinds of building types would help us accommodate the growth we know is coming, provide quality housing at all income levels, and produce the walkable, beautiful, socially connected neighborhoods we all want?

While the revised code currently under consideration by the city makes significant progress towards better designed, more sustainable and attractive multifamily development, the changes are still reactions to the existing code, rather than fresh thinking about how this regulatory framework can shape our environment. Seattle has a rare opportunity to fundamentally re-examine the way we regulate multifamily development.

The American Institute of Architects Seattle believes that the Planning, Land Use, and Neighborhoods Committee (PLUNC) and the Seattle Department of Planning and Development (DPD) should work with experienced advisors to more fundamentally revisit the multifamily code. We were invited to comment on the current proposed code changes, and have decided to focus today's comments specifically on L-zone development.

Best Case Scenario: Start again with the goals in mind

The regulatory framework we develop today will shape our city for the next 20-30 years, and determine the level of public acceptance of a denser, more sustainable development pattern. Do the incremental fixes in this proposed revision take us far enough toward our vision of a livable city? If at all possible, AIA Seattle suggests that the City of Seattle establish a **Technical Advisory Committee** including design professionals to work with the City over the next six to twelve months to fundamentally revisit the multifamily code. In twelve months, we hope to see a much simpler, more flexible performance- and form-based

design responses, and fail to recognize the wide variety of transit choices made by consumers. The cost of building and maintaining garage space, added to the cost of owning and operating a car, create significant expense for the average family. AIA Seattle suggests letting the market decide how much parking is appropriate, rather than requiring one-size-fits-all parking quotas. The City could also encourage higher density around transit areas by allowing more areas with no parking minimums.

Allow more design flexibility

Most designers will tell you that the best design is one that maximizes the specific conditions and qualities of an individual site. Prescriptive requirements encourage housing templates that may not add value to the community, and may decrease affordability. Successful municipal multifamily codes around the country are short, simple, and flexible, and AIA Seattle urges the City to spend time with practitioners over the next twelve months developing a similar approach for Seattle. Within current proposed code revisions, the City could consider strategies like these:

- Allow three stories with all types of sloped roof shapes, not just gabled roofs
- Encourage modulation and gradation within L-zones, by providing a transition from taller L3 and L4 zones to single-family heights in LDT, L1 and L2 zones.

Decouple mass and density

In the current revision proposal, the city has taken a positive step towards sustainable development by decoupling mass and density in some L zones, allowing density to be determined according the specific goals of the project development team. This flexibility allows for various unit sizes and creates potential for affordability. The city should extend this flexibility across all L zones, so that we can have variations in unit sizes and affordability at every scale.

Presenters

Bradley Khouri, AIA
b9 architects inc.

Peter Steinbrueck FAIA
Steinbrueck Urban Strategies, LLC